

# **Avondale Mine Disaster**

September 6, 1869, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, USA

The Avondale Mining Disaster took place on the morning of September 6, 1869 when a fire broke out in the main shaft at the Avondale Colliery (Steuben Coal Co.; colliery leased by the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company) in Plymouth Township, Luzerne County. The fire originated in a furnace at the bottom of the 237-foot shaft. The blaze quickly spread to the wooden breaker (situated on the side hill, 50 or 60 feet higher than the Bloomsburg Railroad tracks below; breaker built in 1867 at a cost of \$130,000, capable of processing about 500 tons of coal daily) that sat directly over the shaft (to save the expense of hauling the coal from the mine to the breaker). The fire consumed the shaft, the head house, and the breaker. Over 450,000 feet of lumber had been used to wall the shaft and build the 60-foot high breaker over the mouth of the shaft. These buildings were built under the supervision of Mr. S. Kingsley. The Dickson Manufacturing Company put up the machinery. As the only entrance to the mine, the shaft became a useless escape route even if the mineworkers trapped inside could have reached it.

In a newspaper column in the August 31, 2008 issue of the *Citizens' Voice*, William Kashatus wrote:

"The fire quickly roared up the Steuben Shaft (the only exit and entrance to the mine) into the engine room of the coal breaker, setting off a tremendous explosion. It spread so rapidly that the neighboring buildings were immediately engulfed. Telegraph operators put out a call to fire companies in every small town from Plymouth to Scranton. As pumpers and water wagons arrived by train, family and friends of the miners rushed to the scene, horrified by the terrible sight. By mid-afternoon, firefighters were pumping a constant stream of water into a tunnel and down the shaft. At 6 p. m., a small dog and a lighted lamp were sent down in a bucket to test the safety of the burned-out shaft. When the dog arrived alive, a small group of volunteers took its place in the bucket, taking turns descending the shaft. Volunteers Thomas W. Williams and David Jones were overcome by toxic gas and became the first of the many victims whose bodies were recovered. The search continued for the next few days. In the early morning of Wednesday, Sept. 8, searchers descended 300 feet below ground and entered a closed brattice in the east gangway where they found 67 dead miners grouped together.[including William R. Evans and his three sons, two in his arms and one at his feet]. They had shut themselves in, hoping to escape the deadly inferno. Another 41 dead laborers were found in groups and individually in other areas of the mine, having fled as far as possible from the burning shaft."

The dead numbered 110 and included 103 men, five boys, and two rescuers, all of whom died of asphyxiation from carbonic gases. Seventy-two women became widows and 153 children lost their fathers. The disaster was called "A Welsh Tragedy" because 69 of the victims were of Welsh heritage. Over 80% of the miners were of Welsh descent, many of whom were recent arrivals from Wales, with families waiting to come to America. Some of the family names are: Davies, Edwards, Evans, Howell, Hughes, James, Jones, Morris, Morgan, Owen, Phillips, Powell, Reese, and Williams. Sixty-one of them were buried at the Washburn Street Cemetery in Hyde Park, Scranton.

The Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad, which was leasing the Avondale Colliery at the time of the disaster, stepped forward at once to help the families of the colliery personnel who were killed in the fire. Samuel Sloan, president, in a dispatch from New York on September 8, addressed to Messrs Storrs, Hallstead and Bound in Scranton said: "NEW YORK – September 8 / Our worst fears are realized. The dead bodies have been found. It now remains for us to perform the sad rites of burial: to mingle our sympathies and sorrows with those who mourn so keenly the loss of those that they love and who were dear to them. They are all our employees, fellow laborers of the same interests. Our directors, moved with deep sympathy and desiring to give every opportunity to the employees to give expression of their respect and sympathy, as well to reverence they had that was smitten down young and old in the midst of life and vigor, and that this appalling event may make a suitable impression on us all, and on the community in which we live: order that all work be suspended and the shops closed on the day on which the funeral ceremonies take place; that the trains be run free to and from the prominent points of the road to enable relations, friends and citizens to attend the funeral ceremonies. You will take charge of the ceremonies and pay the expenses. Samuel Sloan, President." (*Scranton Weekly Republican*, Saturday, September 11, 1869, p. 4)

From the detailed chronology of the tragedy that was published in the *Scranton Weekly Republican* of Saturday, September 11, 1869, we learn that on Wednesday the 8<sup>th</sup>, representatives of the leading pictorial publications in America at that time arrived at the scene of the Avondale disaster:

**"PICTORAL –ARTISTS** G. W. Bradford and Joseph Becker, artists of Frank Leslie [*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, called *Leslie's Weekly*], and Theodore R. Davis of *Harper's [Magazine]* are here taking views."

On page 5 of the September 11, 1869 issue of the *Scranton Weekly Republican*, there is an article titled "AVONDALE MINE REPORTERS". The author of that article makes the very good point that illustrators of the present time, 1869, record what they have seen first hand, as opposed to presenting what they imagine to have taken place, based on the written reports of others. In

making that point, the author of that article uses two events from Wyoming Valley history, the Battle and Massacre of Wyoming in June, 1778, and the Avondale mine disaster of September 1869 as illustrations. Here are the two opening paragraphs of that article:

"At least twice in its two century old history, beautiful and picturesque Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania, has been the focal point of world wide public attention: at the Battle and Massacre of Wyoming in June, 1778, and during the heart rending ordeal of the Avondale Colliery Disaster in September, 1869. In the former instance, the full reporting of the events was at first limited exclusively to the written verbal reports of the journalists and literary figures of the period. Much later, the illustrators went to work on the written reports at hand and accompanied these with drawings and sketches based upon what they imagined had happened from the reporter's texts. / At the time of the Avondale Colliery disaster, we are more fortunate because as soon as the dreadful news was confirmed, the best pictorial artists of the day, especially those from the top metropolitan newspapers and periodicals, were dispatched directly to the actual scene of the calamity to record in their sketchbooks the minutus [sic, perhaps "minutest" was intended] details of the locality and of the victims and the bereaved mining community of Wyoming Valley. Among America's top illustration artists assigned to cover the Avondale scene was Harper's Weekly's gifted young artist, THEODORE RUSSELL DAVIS."

A standard biographical portrait of Theodore Russell Davis is then presented.



Theodore R. Davis (1840-1894), Civil War Artist and *Harper's Weekly* Correspondent

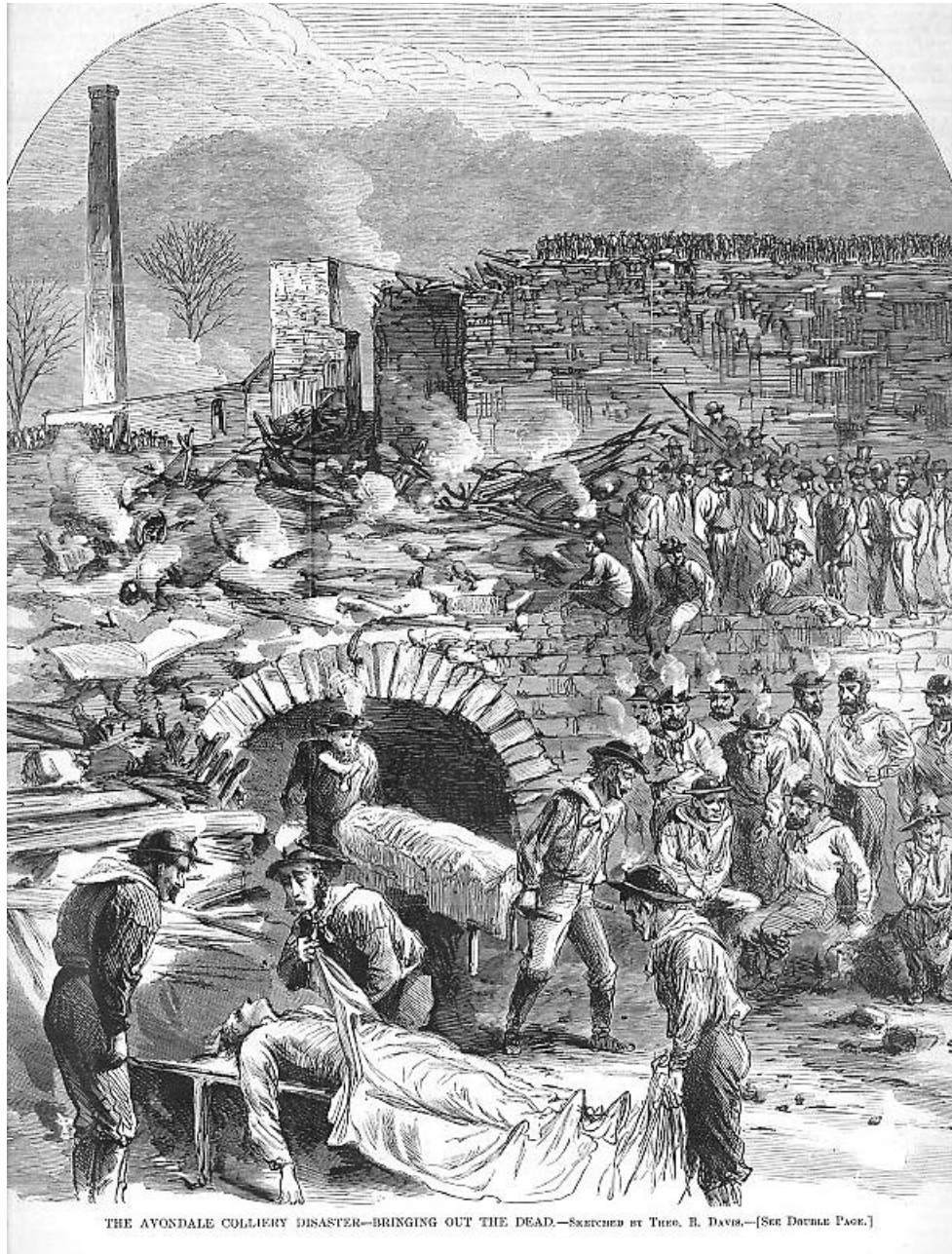
Following that portrait is the following account of Davis' visit to Avondale at the time of the disaster:

**"DAVIS AND AVONDALE** / Arriving at the scene of the Avondale calamity on the morning of September 8, 1869, just as the first bodies of the mining victims were being brought up to the tunnel entrance for identification and burial, Davis almost overwhelmed by the enormity and defenselessness of this great local tragedy, took his stand near the center of each scene of the unfolding drama, and etched in his sketchbook the priceless set of ten sketches which first appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, Saturday, Sept. 25 and Saturday, October 2, 1869. For accuracy in landscape, period wearing apparel mining equipment and the actual moments of anguish and grief of individual groups of the stricken mining community, the drawings of Davis are unsurpassed. Davis died at age 54 in Asbury Park, New Jersey."

Given on the following page is the Theodore Russell Davis engraving, titled "The Avondale Colliery Disaster—Bringing Out the Dead", that was published in *Harper's Magazine*, September 25, 1869.



"The Avondale Colliery Disaster—Bringing Out the Dead," by Theodore Russell Davis; published in *Harper's Magazine*, September 25, 1869



THE AVONDALE COLLIERY DISASTER—BRINGING OUT THE DEAD.—SKETCHED BY THEO. R. DAVIS.—[SEE DOUBLE PAGE.]

From an article in the *Scranton Morning Republican* of Saturday, September 11, 1869, we learn that on Friday afternoon, September 10, Pennsylvania Governor Geary and a delegation of distinguished railroad and coal officials and local citizens took a special train from Scranton to Avondale to visit the site of the disaster and to speak with people there. Among the D&H officials were Thomas Dickson, Coe F. Young, R. Manville, E. W. Weston, and Horace Young. Here is that article:

**"GOV. GEARY GOES TO AVONDALE. He makes a short address yesterday afternoon at one o'clock.** A special train left Scranton for Avondale, drawn by the engine Wm. E. Dodge and containing Gov. Geary and Luther Stroup (his photographic reporter); Wm. R. Storrs of the D. L. & W. RR; J. J. Albright, Union Coal Co.; Thomas Dickson; Coe F. Young; R. Manville; E. W. Weston, D. & H. RR; James Blair; E. C. Fuller; E. B. Burnham, and our reporter, Scranton; H. A. Woodhouse; J. D. Pyott (Honesdale citizen); Horace Young of Honesdale; Mr. Hollingshead, Port Jervis; J. Pinchott and Edward Cuddehook, Pike County; and two ladies: Misses Harding and Hoyt of Wilkes-Barre. At Kingston, Supt. Bound of the L. & B. RR joined the party. On the way, a funeral train of 20 cars was passed bound for Scranton. At Avondale, the whole party disembarked and made a circuit of the various streets of miners' houses during which the Governor was told by Mr. C. Lee how many were dead from each house. The ruins on the top of the hill were examined including the entrance to the shaft. / Gov. Geary made a few remarks to the not large collection of people present. He was glad to see them, but was sorry to do so under such painful circumstances as were made by the great calamity. His heart was deeply affected, those who died, like all of them, were citizens of Pennsylvania. None were so humble as not to have a place in his heart. He would extend to him his heartfelt sympathy and he trusted no such calamity would occur again. . . . / After visiting this portion of the works, the whole party went down and entered the tunnel to its connection with the shaft. Here they witnessed the process of letting a gang of men down into the shaft. They were accompanied by Mr. Davis, Foreman of the Dodge Shaft. They were going down for the purpose of covering the dead mules with acid. About four o'clock, the party started their return. At Pittston, Gov Geary and Mr. Stroup left the train taking conductor Gunnison's train en route for Harrisburg, which arrived soon after. / For a week or more, the Governor has been visiting different localities. He has spoken in that time at Troy, Towanda, LeRaysville, Montrose and Susquehanna Depot, each time to large crowds of people. On Thursday he was present at the dedication of the soldiers' monument erected at Honesdale. Here were present five or six thousand people who were addressed by the Governor."

Nearly a century and a half after the horrific events of September 6, 1869, Avondale remains anthracite's most deadly disaster. The cause of the blaze was hotly debated. Two explanations emerged from the testimony given to a Coroner's Jury. One view held that the fire originated from a spark thrown by the mine's coal-fired ventilating furnace, which acted like a chimney in bringing fresh air underground. The other maintained that someone purposely set the blaze from a tunnel that intersected the shaft 40 feet below the surface.

The Jury chose the “spark-from-the-furnace” cause, while various others—including the *New York Times*, the *Scranton Tribune*, and many from Scranton’s Welsh community—criticized the verdict and argued for arson. They asked whether it was just a coincidence that the tragedy occurred only days after the Avondale workers helped break a three-month, region-wide strike, and that the great majority of the Irish workers (who strongly supported the strike) were absent from the pit on the day of the fire? Some alleged that Molly Maguires were the arsonists. A large number of Avondale’s employees were current or former residents of the Hyde Park section of Scranton. They had been transferred to the mine in Luzerne County about a year earlier by the Delaware, Lackawanna, & Western Railroad, the owner of the mine. Many workers commuted on the daily trains that connected the towns.

"The Avondale mine disaster stands as the worst loss of life in the history of anthracite mining in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Within months of the tragedy, Pennsylvania enacted America's first mine safety law. Among other things, it required mines to have more than one exit, set standards for ventilation and forbid the building of breakers atop mine shafts. / Many of the miners were from Scranton. The bodies of 61 men and boys killed in the fire are buried in the Washburn Street Cemetery in West Scranton. . ." (From an article by David Singleton, staff writer for the *Times-Tribune*, published on July 7, 2008)

PHMC marker on Route 11, near its junction with Route 29, Plymouth Township:

"On Sept. 6, 1869, a fire broke out at the nearby Avondale Colliery, trapping the miners. The eventual death toll was 110. This included five boys between the ages of 12 and 17, and two volunteers who were suffocated while attempting rescue. As a result of the disaster, Pennsylvania's General Assembly enacted legislation in 1870 which was designed to enforce greater safety in the industry."

### **Avondale Commemorative Ceremony, 2011**

A community observance of the 142<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Avondale mining disaster took place on Saturday, September 3, 2011, at 10:30 a.m. at the Washburn Street Cemetery in Scranton, wherein sixty-one of the victims are buried. Many of their tombstones were recently restored and a historical marker installed near their final resting places.

The ceremony, which was organized by Linda Scott ([linmscott@hotmail.com](mailto:linmscott@hotmail.com)) included a color guard, taps, gun salute, reflections, speakers, music, and mining displays and actors. Rick Sedlisky of New York, formerly of Scranton, was the featured speaker. Coal region musician Jay Smar performed. The event was sponsored and coordinated by The St. David’s Society, Friends of the Forgotten, the Old Forge Mining Group, and the Anthracite Living History Group.

Here is an article about the Washburn Street Cemetery and Avondale from the *Scranton Tribune* that was published before the 2011 ceremony:



JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Trevor Hastie, right, listens as his father, Bill Hastie, 92, both of West Pittston, translates the Welsh on a tombstone at Washburn Street Cemetery in Scranton.**

## 19th century tragedy still earns attention

*Avondale mine disaster recalled at city cemetery.*

**BY MEGHAN DAVIS**  
STAFF WRITER

Bill Hastie, with passion in his eyes, led a group through Washburn Street Cemetery in West Scranton on Saturday morning.

The 92-year-old stopped at an older tombstone, one with writing barely visible. A father and son were laid to rest beneath it, he said. He read aloud the words written in Welsh, then translated them for onlookers.

Many of those who perished in the Avondale mining

*Please see **CEMETERY**, Page A7*

# CEMETERY: Condition decried

FROM PAGE A3

disaster in 1869 were buried together, others in family plots. Sixty-one of the 110 who lost their lives that day are buried at the Washburn Street Cemetery. As most of their family are no longer living, community members chose to come together to remember the lives lost. The 142nd anniversary of the tragedy was commemorated Saturday.

The Avondale disaster happened Sept. 6, 1869, when a fire broke out in the main shaft at the Avondale Col-

liery in Plymouth Twp., Luzerne County.

Linda Scott, event organizer, said the remembrance was held for a dual purpose this year — to remember the lives lost and raise awareness about the poor condition of the cemetery, which she said is “deplorable.”

“We always want their memory and their sacrifice for what they did never to be forgotten,” said Ms. Scott. “It is important that people remember the disaster for the men and boys who gave their lives that day.”

Ms. Scott pointed out the

tombstone of the youngest victim

William Hatton, 10, went to the mines that day only to visit his father, who worked there, she said.

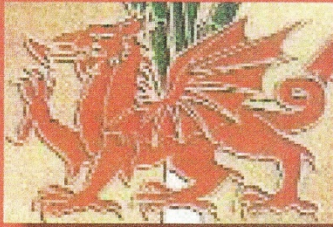
The featured speaker at the ceremony was Rick Sedlisky, who said the Avondale mining disaster hits close to home because his great-grandfathers were coal miners.

“It’s our history,” said Mr. Sedlisky, formerly of Dunmore. “If we don’t keep it going, like other things, it will be forgotten.”

**Contact the writer:**  
mdavis@timeshamrock.com

Here is the article by Robert Davis that was published in *The Red Dragon* about this commemorative ceremony:





# y Ddraig Goch

## The Red Dragon

sds100@gmail.com

Newsletter of the Saint David Society of Lackawanna County

### Officers:

President:  
Robert Davis

Vice-President:  
James Arscott

Treasurer:  
Susan Davis

Secretary:  
Janine Port

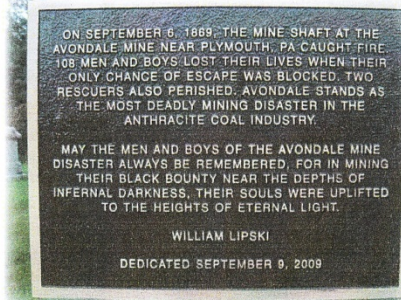
Editor:  
James Arscott

The Saint David Society, founded in 1910, is an organization in which people from Wales and Welsh culture can come together with a common interest and goal of preserving the Welsh history, and culture through language, music, and song. The society is a non-profit, non-sectarian, and non-political organization.

## Victims of Avondale Mine Disaster Remembered

Article by Robert Davis, SDSLC President

On Saturday, September 3rd at the Washburn Street Cemetery a ceremony was held to commemorate the 142nd anniversary of the Avondale Mine Disaster. The ceremony is held every other year and is organized by Linda Scott. The ceremony opened with welcoming remarks by Linda Scott. Everyone in attendance sang the National Anthem, which was followed by Bill Hastie singing *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, the Welsh National Anthem. Robert Davis of the Lackawanna County Saint David Society gave a few remarks. Linda Scott then introduced the main speaker, Rick Sedlisky, a former resident of Scranton, currently living in New York.



Plaque at the Washburn Street Cemetery

Rick spoke about the importance of the disaster in the history of the anthracite mining industry and in the local Welsh community. Jay Smar, a local folk singer, then sang the *Ballad of the Avondale Mine Disaster* accompanied by his guitar. The ballad contains ten stanzas and paints a vivid picture of the disaster and the recovery efforts. The ceremony closed with the Maine Corps League's gun salute and the playing of *Taps*. See *Avondale* on page 3

## Date Set for Saint David's Day Celebration

Saturday, March 3rd is the date set for the next Saint David's Day celebration. The time will be 5:30 p.m. for cocktails and 6:30 for dinner at Genetti's, Dickson City. Menu and entertainment have not been finalized as of this date. Please feel free to contribute suggestions!



## Avondale continued...

The Avondale Disaster occurred on September 6, 1869 in the Steuben Shaft at the Avondale Colliery in Plymouth, Pennsylvania. The mine was owned by the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad. A fire started around 10:30 AM in the shaft and spread to the breaker that was built directly over the shaft. The shaft was the only way out of the mine and it also served as the only ventilation shaft in the mine. The miners could not get out of the mine and the mine filled-up with gasses from the fire. One hundred and ten men and boys were asphyxiated. Most of them were Welsh. Sixty-one of them were brought by train from Plymouth to Hyde Park where they were buried in the Washburn Street Cemetery. The Avondale disaster was the worst disaster in anthracite mining history. Because of the Avondale disaster some of the first mine safety laws

in the United States were put into

effect. All mines had to have a second opening, breakers could not be built over a shaft, and all mines had to be ventilated by a fan and not a ventilation furnace.

It is important that this tragedy is not forgotten. It was a major event in the history of anthracite mining and a major event in the history of the Welsh in America. Today the Washburn Street Cemetery is a place that is slowly being forgotten. The grass is not cut and trees have fallen down and not been cleaned up, but if you visit there and see the graves of these men and boys you will feel the sadness that must have filled the valley back in 1869.

One of the most moving parts of the tragedy is to stand at the grave of Thomas and Willie Hatton. Thomas was a miner. Willie was his ten year old son, who wanted to see where his father worked. September 6, 1869 was Thomas' day off. He took Willie into the mine. When they were found, Thomas was holding his son in his arms as if they had both fallen asleep.

To learn more about the Avondale disaster read the book *Tragedy at Avondale* by Robert P. Wolensky and Joseph M. Keating. It is available in local book stores and at the Lackawanna Coal Mine Gift Shop and at the Anthracite Museum Gift Shop at McDade Park.

*arson: set by the  
Irish  
laborers*



Above: Photos from the burial area at Washburn Street Cemetery

sdslc100@gmail.com

In an article titled "September 6, 2013—The 144<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Avondale Mine Disaster" by Elaine LaGreca (*The Searcher*, Newsletter of the Genealogical Research Society of Northeastern Pennsylvania, Inc., Volume 15, No. 4, October 2013, p. 13), Ms. LaGreca states: "Many of the victims were Welsh mine workers who had come from the Scranton area to work in the mine. . . When I was in Wilkes-Barre in August for the unveiling of the USPS Coal Miner's Commemorative Postage Stamp I was able to take a trip to the Avondale Mine. It had been eight years since I had last been there. Memorial gardens had been added to each side of the mine opening. . ."

Another contact person on the Avondale tragedy: Robert P. Wolensky (representing the Anthracite Heritage Foundation), [rwolensk@uwsp.edu](mailto:rwolensk@uwsp.edu)<mailto, 715 252 6742

#### **Avondale Commemorative Ceremony, 2014**

On September 6, 2014, a memorial ceremony took place at the Washburn Street Cemetery to commemorate the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Avondale mine disaster. The ceremony was organized and conducted by the Avondale Washburn 2014 Remembrance Committee (Linda Scott, Rick Sedlisky, Torry Watkins, Robert Wolensky) The photograph on the cover of this DVD was taken at this ceremony by the author, who was invited to participate in these commemorative activities.

Here is the program of these commemorative ceremonies in 2014:



Opening Welcome  
Linda Scott, Clarks Summit

Invocation  
Fr. Eric Bergman, Pastor, St. Thomas More Church, Scranton,

Welsh National Anthem. William Hastie, Sr.

American National Anthem, Katie Blake

St. David's Society, James Arscott, President

Welcome Remarks and Introduction of Special Guests and Speakers

Robert P. Wolensky, Ph.D.  
University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point

Introduction by Prof. Wolensky of  
Rick Sedlisky, New York  
Washburn Street Cemetery History

Introduction by Rick Sedlisky of  
Dominick Graziano, Executive Director, Washburn Street Cemetery

Remarks by Dr. S.  
Robert Powell,  
President of the  
Carbondale Historical  
Society and Museum

Steve Kondrad, President, Plymouth Historical Society  
Avondale Mine Site Update

Mary Beth Kondrad, Descendant of John D. Evans  
Avondale Victim Laid to Rest at Washburn

Floral Placement  
Friends of the Forgotten  
Northeast Wing, Scranton

Closing Benediction  
Fr. Eric Bergman, Pastor, St. Thomas More Church, Scranton.

Gun Salute and Taps  
Northeast Detachment Marine Corp League

Here, from the program of the day in 2014, are the names of the 61 men and boys whose earthly remains are interred in three rows in the Avondale section of Washburn Street Cemetery (an eminence in the northwestern part of the cemetery) and in family plots elsewhere in the cemetery which, in the nineteenth century was called the "Hyde Park Cemetery, Washburn Street".

Listed are the names of the known men and boys laid to rest at  
Washburn Street Cemetery

<u>Lower Row</u>	<u>Middle Row</u>	<u>Upper Row</u>
1. Thomas Morris	1. Thomas Hatton	1. John Harris
2. Thomas Davies	William Hatton	2. Richard Owen
3. John Burch	2. Thomas D. Jones	3. William R. Rees
4. John Burch Jr.	Daniel D. Jones	4. William Evans
5. William Powell	3. David Thomas	5. Methusalem Evans
6. James Powell	4. Thomas L. Jones	6. William Evans
7. William Harding	5. Thomas Hughes	7. Lewis Evans
William L. Williams	John Hughes	8. William R. Evans
8. William N. Williams	6. William Lewis	9. William Bowen
9. Edward Bowen	7. Samuel R. Morgan	10. Rowland Jones
10. William D. Jones	8. Evan Rees	
11. Morgan Watkins	9. Henry Morris	<b>Laid to Rest in Family Plots</b>
12. Richard Woolley	10. James Phillips	
13. William J. Evans	11. David J. Rees	
14. Edward Edwards	12. David Rees	Evan Hughes
15. William Porfit	13. William Rees	John Bowen
16. John Jenkins	14. William T. Morgan	Thomas Phillips
17. John D. Evans	15. Lewis Davies	Willie Phillips
18. William J. Davies	16. Rees Lumley	
19. James T. Williams	17. Joseph Morris	
20. John J. Thomas	18. John E. Thomas	
	19. Thomas Llewellyn	
	20. Rees Llewellyn	

Other Cemeteries where the earthly remains of Avondale victims are interred:

1. Shupp's Cemetery, Plymouth
  2. Cemetery at Pittston
  3. Cemetery at Forty Fort
  4. Cathedral Cemetery in Hyde Park
  5. Summit Hill Cemetery
  6. Catholic Cemetery in Wilkes-Barre
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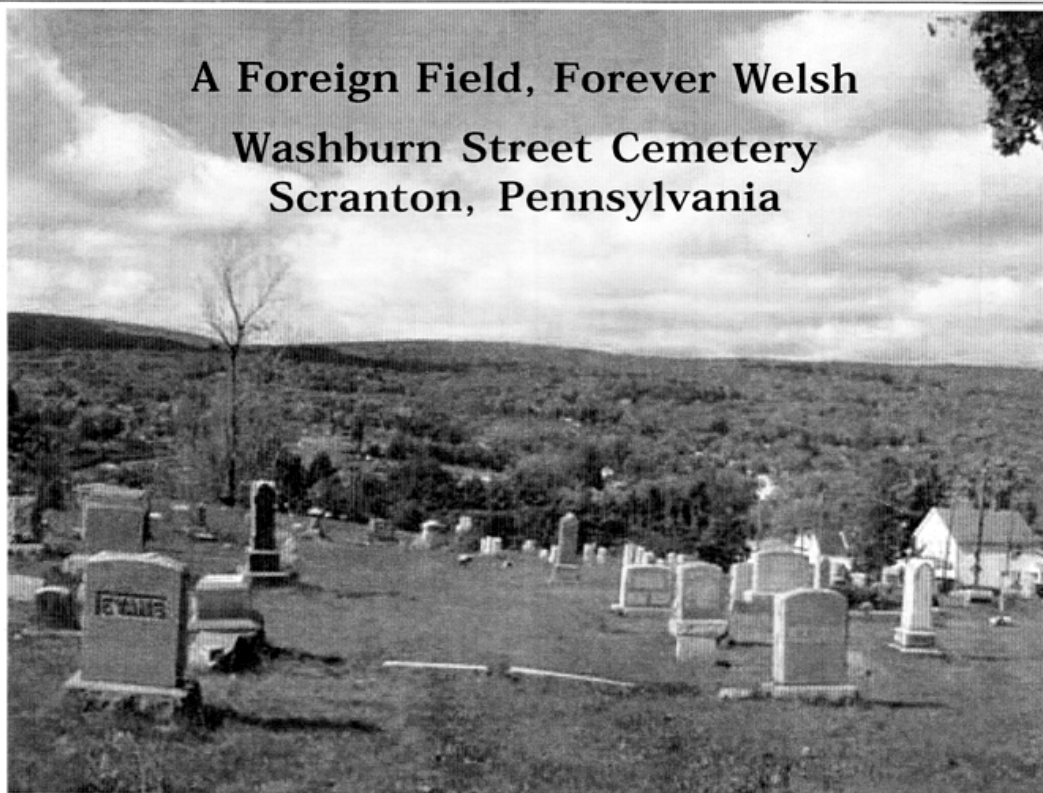
More Avondale material from *The Searcher*, Summer 2014 is given below:



# The Searcher

Newsletter of the Genealogical Research Society of Northeastern Pennsylvania, Inc.

Vol. 16 No. 3; P.O. Box 1, Olyphant, PA 18447-0001; Telephone: 570-383-7661; Fax: 570-383-7466; Email: info@grsnp.org



## A Foreign Field, Forever Welsh Washburn Street Cemetery Scranton, Pennsylvania

*The following article was written by Prof. Bill Jones and appeared in the Welsh Online.co.uk (Western Mail) on Tuesday, 10 April 2012. GRSNP extends its gratitude to the Western Mail for granting its permission to us to reprint the article. Picture courtesy of Elaine LaGreca.*

A cemetery in America speaks for the great communities of industrious Welsh emigrants.

It could so easily be a cemetery in Wales. Thirty-nine acres full of Welsh history, the final resting place of people who created what was once one of the most distinctive Welsh communities that ever existed.

Here rest in peace Welsh people of all ages and callings. All around are gravestones marked with familiar Welsh surnames like Davies, Edward, Evans, Jones, Thomas and Williams. Many of the inscriptions on the stones are in Welsh. Apparently, over a hundred men and boys named John Jones and Williams Evans are buried here.

(Continued on Page 4)

## **A Foreign Field, Forever Welsh Washburn Street Cemetery Scranton, Pennsylvania**

By Professor Bill Jones  
(Continued from Front Page)

Here to are powerful reminders of the conflicts and tragedies of a turbulent Welsh industrial past. In one historic section lie the graves of 61 men and boys. They died from suffocation underground as a result of a fire in the shaft of the Avondale colliery on September 6, 1869 (the mine only had one shaft and those trapped underground had no means of escape; in all, 110 died). All 61 were buried on September 9 and all the local stores and businesses were ordered to close for the day. The final cortege - 12 coffins and mourners - made its way up to the cemetery at seven in the evening as dusk fell. The tragedy made international news, the Western Mail carrying several reports including lists of the deceased.



*Picture of the Avondale section at Washburn Street Cemetery courtesy of Jeff Vesnesky.*

In this cemetery too are the graves of Benjamin Davies and Daniel Jones, two miners shot dead by soldiers on May 17, 1871 during a disturbance in a nearby street as a long coal strike reached its violent climax. Davies and Jones were buried two days later.

Davies' infant son, Taliesin, had died the morning of the funeral and was buried in the same coffin as his father. A Welsh newspaper estimated that up to 10,000

people were in the cemetery attending the graveside services, which were exclusively in Welsh. Looking on were the soldiers who ringed the graveyard's boundary fence, keeping a nervous eye on the stunned and grieving Welsh community.

### **A global history**

But, this hallowed ground isn't in Wales. It's reputedly the largest Welsh cemetery to be found anywhere in the USA, and it's possibly the largest anywhere in the world outside Wales. This is the Washburn or "Welsh" Cemetery in Hyde Park, in the city of Scranton in the northeast Pennsylvania anthracite coalfield.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Scranton was "the Anthracite Capital of the world" and was in the top 40 largest cities in the USA. Like so many places in Wales during the same period, Scranton was the child of booming iron and coal industries.

No wonder newly arrived Welsh wrote home to say that the place was exactly like Merthyr or Aberdare or Tredegar, to name but three of many obvious counterparts.

Scranton, and especially Hyde Park, where the bulk of the city's Welsh lived, was also the epicenter of Welsh America during the years when Welsh migration overseas was at its greatest.

(Continued on Page 5)

## **A Foreign Field, Forever Welsh Washburn Street Cemetery Scranton, Pennsylvania**

By Professor Bill Jones

(Continued from Page 4)

It may seem far-fetched to suggest that Scranton's Washburn Street Cemetery is the most important place in Welsh history. Probably not many of today's readers of the Western Mail have even heard of it, let alone been there. But this foreign field that is forever Wales needs to be remembered and treasured. It ought to be considered as one of the most important Welsh historical sites for several reasons.

First, it symbolizes an often ignored important element in the history of Wales. Welsh history isn't just about the Welsh in Wales, or the Welsh in England. Large numbers of Welsh people have become parts of the histories of Argentina, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and, of course, the USA, by far the most popular of Welsh emigrant destinations. Because of a frustrating combination of absence of statistical records and the unreliability of those that were kept, we don't know how many Welsh people in total settled overseas. Possibly as many as a quarter of a million people born in Wales were living overseas at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Welsh have a tradition of settling overseas that goes back centuries and still continues today. In some places they settle in sufficient numbers to make a major economic and cultural impact and give those locations an unmistakable Welsh flavor: the Chubut valley in Patagonia, the former goldfield towns of Victoria, Australia; the farming areas in Upper New York State, Wisconsin or Southern Ohio, and the coal and steel towns of Pennsylvania.

The Washburn Street Cemetery represents the global history of the Welsh. It's also a fitting memorial to those ordinary Welsh people who made up the bulk of the migrants.

Much of what has been written on the Welsh overseas has inevitably concentrated on those who became famous in their adoptive societies. But Welsh emigration is also a rich human tale of hopes and triumphs and failures and tragedies. The kind of stories that finally came to rest in the Washburn Street Cemetery.

### **"The largest real Welsh community in the world"**

The Washburn Street Cemetery also deserves to figure prominently in any list of the most important places in Welsh history because it is a memorial to what was the largest and arguably the most important Welsh community outside Wales and England during the Victorian and Edwardian era. A century ago Scranton was a "household word" in Wales, as the historian David Williams described it. It was probably the most powerful magnet of all those that attracted people out of Wales during those years. In 1890 nearly 5,000 people who were born in Wales were living in Scranton. Another 5,000 were American-born children of these native Welsh. Nowhere outside England and Wales had so many Welsh inhabitants. They also formed a substantial proportion of the city's total population, forming nearly 15% of the city's diverse ethnic mix.

Scranton was also a very important cultural centre in Welsh-American life and its Welsh inhabitants took that role very seriously. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the city was known as "Then Cymru America" (the Welsh Athens of America) because of the richness of its Welsh cultural life. Some of the largest and most prestigious eisteddfodau in America were held there, including the National American Eisteddfodau of 1875, 1880, 1885, 1902, 1905 and 1908, which absorbed the attention of all of Scranton's inhabitants, whatever their nationality, and most of the Welsh in America. According to the Western Mail, the 1880 eisteddfod pavilion "presented a very brilliant scene at the opening". Several Welsh Language newspapers and magazines were published

(Continued on Page 6)

## **A Foreign Field, Forever Welsh Washburn Street Cemetery Scranton, Pennsylvania**

By Professor Bill Jones

(Continued from Page 5)

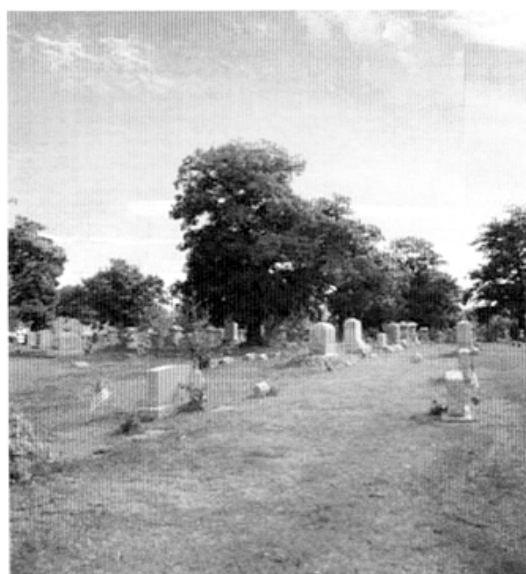
in Scranton in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, as were English-language ones in later decades. In the great four-day-long World's Fair International Eisteddfod held in Chicago in September 1893, the Scranton Welsh fielded not merely one but two choirs (460 choristers in all) in the Chief Choral for Mixed Voices competition. The Scranton Choral Union, led by the Aberaman-born Haydn Evans, won the contest.

So strong was Scranton's Welshness during its Welsh golden era that in June 1910 the locally-published Welsh-American newspaper, the *Druid*, threw down a remarkable gauntlet. It demanded that the forthcoming Investiture Ceremony of the Prince of Wales, to be held in 1911, ought to take place not in Caernarfon or Cardiff but in Scranton.

Scranton was the best place to host the event, it declared, because "we are the largest real Welsh community in the world. And when Caernarfon was chosen as the venue, the newspaper snootily reposted (in September 1910) that Caernarfon should reciprocate by sending David Lloyd George to Scranton so that he could be proclaimed as the "uncrowned king of the Welsh people: at the following year's "Big Welsh Day". The Scranton Welsh would much prefer the latter to "the investing of a dozen princes", it said. Hardly surprisingly perhaps, the Scranton Welsh community was widely regarded as being top in almost everything but bottom in modesty. And David Lloyd George did come, eventually, on a rainy evening in November 1923.

### **Buried in his own graveyard**

The graveyard's official name is the Hyde Park Cemetery although it is most often known as the Washburn Street Cemetery. But for generations it has been known as the "Welsh Cemetery" or, as it appears in innumerable death notices and



*Picture courtesy of Elaine LaGreca*

reports of funerals in Welsh-language Welsh American newspapers, "*Mynwent y Cymru*" or "*Claddfa'r Cymru*". Even the Scranton City Directories of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century called it the "Welsh Cemetery".

During its early years it was a small public burial ground for the residents of Hyde Park borough. The cemetery's first "resident" was Margaret Lynch, who died in 1832 and who had no Welsh connections as far as I'm aware. But from the 1840s onwards, as the Welsh presence in Scranton began to grow, so too did the cemetery increasingly bear an indelible stamp of Welshness.

Fittingly, one important strand in the cemetery's history is the benevolence of a Welshman, Thomas Phillips, a leader among the Welsh and one of the most generous philanthropists of his day. In 1862 the original cemetery was expanded when Phillips purchased additional land for a burial ground. At the time of his death in May 1886, the city's *Sunday Free Press* insisted that "few men are better known or more respected in Hyde Park... To him we are indebted for the pretty Washburn Street Cemetery". Born in Nantyglo in 1824,

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## **A Foreign Field, Forever Welsh Washburn Street Cemetery Scranton, Pennsylvania**

By Professor Bill Jones

(Continued from Page 6)

Phillips emigrated to America with his parents when he was eight years old, and came to Hyde Park in 1854. A fine example of the crucial part Welsh industrial skills played in Scranton's spectacular economic development, Phillips became general manager of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western, the largest coal mining company in the area. His life also epitomizes the vibrancy of Scranton's Welsh cultural life and the impact the Welsh made in many other walks of Scranton's life. Among many things he was one of the owners and editors of the Scranton-published *Banner America* (*Banner of America*) newspaper, a founder of the Welsh Philosophical Society, and Republican representative in the Pennsylvania State Legislature in the early 1880s. He was laid to rest on May 5, 1886, "in his own graveyard" as a Welsh-American newspaper put it. His funeral was one of the largest that has ever taken place in West Scranton.

### **The final resting place of Scranton's Welsh**

Welshness burnt brightly in Scranton but relatively briefly. Eventually the Welsh language and Welsh religious and cultural institutions declined as the processes of cultural change and the adopting of new identities gathered momentum. First generation Welsh migrants passed away and subsequent generations regarded themselves far more as American than Welsh and American. And the stream of new Welsh migrants in search of a better life that had constantly replenished the city's Welshness for over half a century dried up in the inter-war years when Scranton, like Wales, experienced a savage economic depression.

In many ways, then, the Washburn Street Cemetery is a striking metaphor for the rise and decline of the city's

Welshness. In 1983 a Scranton resident described the cemetery as "the final resting place of the city's Welsh". When I spent time in Scranton in 1981 doing research for my Ph.D. thesis on the Welsh in America, I often asked people I met "Where did all the Welsh go?" I vividly remember the answer I invariably got: "They're in Washburn Street."

But the history of the Washburn Street Cemetery is not just a history from below, a history that is now dead and buried. A sense of Welshness and pride in Welsh heritage still lives on in many parts of the world, as the large number of active Welsh societies overseas today shows. Scranton still has a Welsh profile through the efforts of local Welsh societies like the St. David's Society of Lackawanna County and the Scranton Welsh Male Chorus.

### **Preserving for the future**

The Washburn Street Cemetery has itself been one of the focal points of present-day Welsh activity in Scranton. Over the years, it has had a troubled history as a result of neglect, poor maintenance and vandalism. Gravestones have been broken or have sunk into the ground and the cemetery is often used as a dumping ground. In the past 20 years local enthusiasts and organizations have worked hard to clean up the cemetery and draw attention to its historic importance because of its links with the 1869 Avondale Mine Disaster. This was the worst disaster in the history of coal mining in north-east Pennsylvania. In its aftermath the state enacted America's first mine safety legislation.

Avondale was also a very Welsh mining disaster. More than 70 of the 110 victims were Welsh, as were all 61 of those buried in Washburn Street Cemetery, among them William D. Jones, who left a wife and four children in Aberdare. In 1994 the National Welsh American Foundation, working with local groups and heritage organization, sponsored a plaque commemorating the disaster, which was erected at the entrance to the cemetery. In 2009 a plaque was also erected adjacent to the graves. The local enthusiasts who are determinedly striving to

(Continued on Page 8)



## **A Foreign Field, Forever Welsh Washburn Street Cemetery Scranton, Pennsylvania**

By Professor Bill Jones

(Continued from Page 7)

clean up the cemetery and draw attention to its historic significance deserve support from Wales.

The Washburn Street Cemetery is 180 years old this year. What better birthday present for this historic site than to recognize it as one of the most important places in Welsh history. This would be very appropriate in 2012, as later this year the North American Festival of Wales, the premier event on the North American Welsh calendar, will be held in Scranton.

The Washburn Street Cemetery's 39 acres are a perfect memorial for us to remember and pay tribute to the story of Welsh people outside Wales in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This evocative field far away from Wales is not "foreign"; it's part of the history of Wales. But it's also part of the history of America. What happens to Welshness when it is transplanted in different cultures, languages and nations is a central feature of the complex and diverse history of the Welsh people.

Finally, the Washburn Street Cemetery also lives on as a tribute to ongoing efforts all over the world to keep Welsh heritage and links with Wales alive. Perhaps Hillary Rodham Clinton, former New York Senator, former First Lady of the USA and current US Secretary of State, would agree with me. Unlike David Lloyd George nearly 70 years earlier, on April 10, 1993 she and husband Bill visited the cemetery.

They were there to attend the graveside service of its most well known occupant: Hillary's father, Hugh E. Rodham, who was brought up in Scranton. His mortal remains lie alongside those of Hillary's paternal grandfather and grandmother, Hannah Jones (1882 - 1952), from Wales.



*Picture courtesy of Elaine LaGreca*

Fittingly perhaps for a Welsh cemetery, it rained heavily the day of the burial.

[Editor's Note: GRSNP has an extensive collection of the Washburn Street Cemetery burial permits.]

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### **Who are you, Professor Bill Jones?**



*Picture courtesy of Prof. Bill Jones*

I'm originally from Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire. I'm currently Reader in Modern Welsh History at the School of History, Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University.

(Continued on Page 9)

**Who are you, Professor Bill Jones?**  
(Continued from Page 8)

I've been teaching modern Welsh, British and migration history there in English and Welsh for the past 18 years.

I'm also co-director of the Cardiff Centre for Welsh American Studies. I specialize in the history of Welsh migration and the history of the Welsh overseas and have published extensively on these subjects.

My Ph.D. thesis and first book was on the history of the Welsh in Scranton, Pennsylvania, "Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh 1860-1920".

**Where's your favourite place in Wales?**

Contrary to what my article might suggest, my favourite place in Wales is not a cemetery. It's the Brecon Beacons, where I go for long walks as often as I can. Particular favourite spots of mine are on the peaks overlooking Llyn y Fan Fawr and Llyn y Fan Fach.

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*In remembrance of the  
110 men and boys who perished  
September 6, 1869*

**The 145th Anniversary  
Remembrance of the  
Avondale Mine Disaster**

will take place  
**Saturday, September 6, 2014**  
at 11 a.m.  
at  
**Washburn Street Cemetery**  
1915 Washburn Street  
Scranton, Pennsylvania

September 6, 2014 will mark the 145th anniversary of the tragedy that took the lives of 110 men and boys at Avondale Mine, Plymouth Twp. in Luzerne County. On that date a remembrance will be held at Washburn Street Cemetery in Scranton for the Avondale victims interred in Washburn.

The Avondale victims' resting places in Washburn Cemetery saw many improvements during 2013. Daffodils that were planted in 2012 and 2013 bloomed in abundance this spring, offering a beautiful spread of the national flower of Wales along the resting places of the Avondale men and boys who called Scranton their home.

A new executive director took the helm at Washburn Cemetery in 2013. He and his groundskeepers have been working



to bring it to a level of care they and we desire. While there is still a way to go, lawns are mowed and trash continues to be removed on a regular basis. Washburn has become a destination point for joggers and dog walkers.

The Avondale disaster united a region and its miners who lived in the anthracite coal mining cities and towns. Please join us to honor the men and boys who perished on September 6, 1869 and to recognize the tragedy that put in motion changes in the coal mining industry for all future coal miners.

If you have any questions please  
contact us via email at:  
avondaleremembrance2014@gmail.com

*The Avondale Washburn 2014  
Remembrance Committee*  
Elaine LaGreca, Linda Scott, Rick Sedlisky,  
Torry Watkins and Robert Wolensky

## People Power at Avondale

by Rick Sedlisky

The power of the people must never be underestimated. The Avondale Mine site in Plymouth Twp. was fast becoming a destination point for those who found it convenient to illegally dump garbage near the location of the Avondale Mine where on September 6, 1869, 108 men and boys lost their lives in a fire that raged above them as they remained trapped in the mine with no way out. Two would be rescuers also perished.

Previous efforts by volunteers to remove garbage were met with continued dumping. It appeared to be a losing battle until security gates on either end of the access road were installed by UGI Utilities.



*Picture courtesy of Steve Kondrad*

On Saturday, April 27, a cleanup at the site sponsored by the Plymouth Historical Society saw more than 70 people pitch in and remove garbage that nearly filled a 40 cubic yard dumpster. Among those who participated were a large number of students from Wilkes-Barre Coughlin Junior Senior High School. Other organizations at the cleanup included Faith Baptist Church of Plymouth, Luzerne County Community College, Eastern Pennsylvania Coalition of Abandoned Mine Reclamation,

Plymouth Neighborhood Watch, the Kiwanis Club, as well as individual citizens.

Supplies and landfill tonnage were provided through Great American Clean Up of Pennsylvania. The truck used to haul the refuse to the dumpster owned by Northeast Cartage of Hanover Twp., was courtesy of Plymouth Historical Society board member, Albert Dragan. Funding for the cleanup came via a Mine Site Reclamation grant that was awarded by the Anthracite Region Independent Power Producers Association.



*Picture courtesy of Steve Kondrad*

On September 6, 2014, the Avondale Mine site will be one of two locations where remembrances will be held to commemorate the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster. The other location is the Washburn Street Cemetery in West Scranton where roughly half of the victims were laid to rest.



*Picture courtesy of Steve Kondrad*

## The 1869 Avondale Mine Disaster: A Trans-Atlantic Welsh Tragedy, Part 1

By Jonson Miller

The deadliest mining disaster of the anthracite coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania occurred on September 6, 1869, in Plymouth Township, near Wilkes-Barre in the Wyoming Valley. On that day, 108 mine workers, including five boys, died in a mine of the Avondale Colliery. The wood lining of the shaft, the only way in or out of the mine, caught fire that morning. The fire spread upwards to the wooden "breaker" that contained the various machines and tools for cleaning and sorting coal as it left the mine. The burning breaker blocked the mine workers' exit and the rescuers' entrance. After three days of fighting the fire, navigating dangerous mine gases, and making the shaft passable, crews finally retrieved the bodies of all 108 mine workers and two would-be rescuers. Two-thirds of the 108 mine workers were Welsh. These 110 workers left behind fifty-nine widows and 109 fatherless children in America, with an additional unknown number of widows and children in Wales.

Readers of *Ninnau* may be familiar with this tragedy through articles about the memorial at the old mine entrance in Plymouth and the restoration of the Scranton cemetery where most of the Welsh victims were buried. These memorials to the dead mark the tragedy as a local one. It was indeed traumatic, especially for the Welsh people of the Wyoming Valley, which

was then the population center of Welsh America. In fact, there were then more people speaking Welsh in the valley, perhaps thirty thousand of them, than anywhere outside of Wales or London.

The legislative consequences of the tragedy mark this local event as of state and even of national consequence. After the disaster, Pennsylvanians demanded and gained new mining regulations that dramatically reduced the dangers of mining by, for example, requiring inspections, banning the placement of breakers over mine entrances, and by requiring second exits and better ventilation. Most immediately was the Mine Safety Law of 1870, which covered only anthracite workers. The state passed similar laws for bituminous mines in 1877. Other states adopted similar laws, with Avondale being the constant watchword of legislators, mine workers, preachers, and reformers. Over the eight years during which these laws spread, the fatality rate for mine workers dropped by half, from more than 1300 deaths each year to about 650.

While the Avondale disaster was certainly an important and traumatic local event, with state and national consequences, it was also an international event. International reporting prompted even working people from other countries to donate to the victims' families, who now faced destitution. Queen Victoria also sent a donation.

But, internationally, the tragedy was felt most acutely by

the people of Wales. Indeed, the Welsh response to the events shows the extent to which there was a single trans-Atlantic Welsh community bound together by frequent travel in both directions, letters, and the Welsh press, especially the Welsh-language presses of the United States and Wales.

Both the English- and Welsh-language presses of Wales reported on the tragedy. One might not expect the English-language papers to express great sympathy or demand labor protections. The English language was, after all, identified with conservatism because of its association with the established Anglican Church and the monarchy. Moreover, Welsh conservatives saw the Welsh language as backwards, both morally and economically. Not all the papers were conservative. But, regardless of their politics, the press uniformly expressed outrage at the deaths in Avondale, especially once they recognized that the majority of the victims were Welsh. Both the liberal *Cardiff Times* and the conservative *Western Mail* called on America to adopt mine safety standards like those already adopted in Britain, especially mandatory safety inspections and requiring at least two exits in every mine. The conservative *Pembrokeshire Herald* described the terrible state of safety regulation and concluded that the fire and the deaths had been "inevitable." The papers did not accept that the fire was merely an accident. While they said little of credible claims of



This marker identifies the Avondale victims buried in the Washburn Street Cemetery in the old Welsh Hyde Park neighborhood of Scranton.

arson, they blamed the company for creating the situation. For the papers, the disaster wasn't just some far-off tragedy that happened to someone else; it was, as the conservative *Western Mail* said, the loss of "our countrymen." The English-language press reported on the disaster for six weeks, angrily denouncing the conditions that led to the unnecessary deaths of members of their common Welsh community.

The Welsh-language press was more uniformly liberal, defined as such partly because Welsh-speaking people tended to be religious Nonconformists who supported the disestablishment of the Anglican Church. The English-language papers relied upon English-language papers from America and news services, which often led to the papers providing identical reporting, just as one might see



the same Associated Press articles in numerous American newspapers today.

But while the Welsh-language papers drew somewhat on the Welsh-language press of America, they also drew on letters from Welsh-American witnesses and participants in the disaster. Consequently, this press provided a more intimate view of the tragedy. Nonetheless, the conclusions of the papers were the same as those of the English-language press.

*Y Gwladgarwr* (The Patriot), for example, published a letter from an American bard Ioan ap Ieuan Llwyd, who wrote that, regardless of the cause of the fire, "y mae mwyaf cywilydd i'w berchenogion, ac hefyd i'r llywodraeth" (the great shame is to the owners, and also to the

government).

While the presses of both languages agreed on where to place the blame and what was to be done, Pennsylvania was a more abstract place to English-speaking news readers. For Welsh-speakers, especially those in South Wales, Pennsylvania and some of its towns were household names. It was a place where their family and former neighbors lived and worked. Surely this is why *Y Dydd* (The Day) made sure to state how many miles Plymouth was from Scranton and New York City, two cities known well to Welsh people. Readers wanted to know if their friends and family could have been among the victims. And this is why the Welsh press, rather than the English press, made sure to publish a complete list of the Welsh victims and any facts known about their place of origins in Wales and their Welsh family members. The tragedy was not a distant one; it happened to their own community, regardless of which side of the Atlantic Avondale was on.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Welsh reporting on the tragedy was the expression of uniform outrage that crossed class, language, political, and regional boundaries. Conservative Anglican, English-language papers of South Wales were just as outraged as liberal, Nonconformist, Welsh-language papers of North Wales. And this outrage was not for the victimization of some far-off people, but for what they saw as the avoidable and tragic deaths of their own countrymen in a Welsh community that existed on both sides of the Atlantic.

# The 1869 Avondale Mine Disaster: A Trans-Atlantic Welsh Tragedy, Part 2

*Ninnaw*  
*November -*  
*December*  
*2018, p. 31*

By Jonson Miller

While the newspapers of Wales were responding to the Avondale tragedy, the Welsh-American press was of course responding as well. In fact, there were not really two separate presses, at least not defined by what side of the Atlantic they were on. Perhaps there were separate English- and Welsh-language presses. But the Welsh-language presses of the two countries were integrated by sharing articles and publishing letters from people on the opposite side of the Atlantic. In fact, one of the purposes of this press and these letters was to maintain ties between individuals, families, and communities on both sides of the ocean. In other words, one purpose of the Welsh-language press was to maintain a single trans-Atlantic Welsh community. This article examines the Welsh-American response to the Avondale tragedy, both in the Welsh-language press and in other evidence for public opinion.

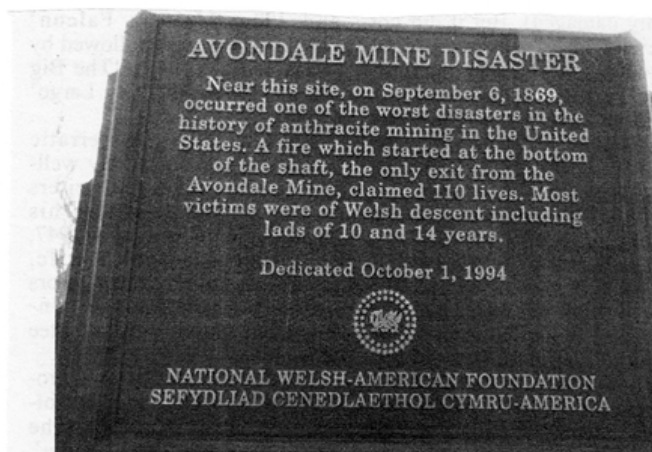
Unfortunately, we have just one preserved article from *Y Drych* (The Mirror), the premier Welsh-American newspaper at the time that discusses the tragedy. Moreover, that issue was from November, two months after the event. The paper was then a nondenominational, Republican paper. This article was really a long letter by Henry J. Philips of the Hyde Park neighborhood of Scranton. He had been a mining engineer for the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad (DL&W), which owned the mine. He had witnessed the fire and the rescue. He had also inspected the mine two or three weeks before the fire and, consequently, testified during the coroner's inquest. He wrote, "Ac erf od wythnosau wedi myned heibio, nid yw y teimlad hwnw o barth y trychineb wedi lleihau nemawr" (And although weeks have passed, that feeling from the area of the tragedy has not decreased much). He argued,

disagreeing with the inquest jury, that the fire was not an accident; it had to have occurred by arson. Nonetheless, mine safety laws could have prevented this mass murder. We can hear the voices of other Welsh engineers and mine workers in the coroner's inquest transcript and in the letters they wrote and that are preserved in newspapers in Wales. While they disagreed on the cause of the fire, they, like the press of Wales, agreed on the need for new laws.

There was no clear separation between the Welsh-language presses of America and Wales. They republished one another's articles and letters from the opposite side of the Atlantic. There was really one trans-Atlantic Welsh-language press community. Given that fact and the attitudes of common Welsh Americans, one might expect, therefore, the Welsh-language press reaction in America would be the same as the press reaction in Wales. Oddly, except perhaps for the nondenominational *Y Drych*, it wasn't. If the meagerly preserved issues of the denominational magazines of America are representative, the Welsh-American press was out of step with all of the other Welsh voices discussed so far.

The National Library of Wales has preserved the Congregationalist *Y Cenhadwr Americanaidd* (The American Missionary) and the Presbyterian *Y Cyfaill o'r Hen Wlad yn America* (The Friend of the Old Country in America), both published in Utica, New York, though *Y Cyfaill* was edited by Welsh-born Morgan A. Ellis of Hyde Park, who would likely have witnessed the rescue and the mass funeral in Hyde Park. Both magazines published just a single article in their October issues and nothing in November, suggesting a lack of interest out of step with the scale of the event for the Welsh-American community.

The magazines shared a common apolitical tone. The articles discuss only the discovery of the fire, a detailed description of



the rescue attempt, the recovery of bodies, the number of orphans and widows, and fundraising efforts for survivors.

Despite the popularity of the belief in arson, the articles never mention it. They did not call for mine safety laws. They offered no judgement or blame, except for a single sentence with no elaboration in *Cenhadwr*, "Pe buasai shaft arall yn bod... gallasai y dynion ddianc o'r perygal pan gymerodd le" (If there had been another shaft... the men could have escaped the danger when it occurred).

Congregationalist minister Richard D. Thomas, who had traveled extensively throughout America's Welsh communities in the 1850s, wrote his encyclopedic 1872 *Hanes Cymry America* (A History of the Welsh of America) to catalogue influential Welsh men, churches, and institutions. Remarkably, he says virtually nothing about the Avondale tragedy of just a few years before his book's publication. In his entry on Plymouth, he writes merely that, "To the south of it is Avondale where there was a great disaster!"

Indeed there was. It is remarkable that a fire that killed 110 men and boys, mostly Welsh, that outraged both the English-language press of America and the entire press of Wales, should provoke a mere

description in the denominational Welsh-language press of America and single vague sentence from another minister. Carmarthen's *Seren Cymru* (The Star of Wales) published statements from two Welsh-American ministers in October, E. B. Evans and *Y Cyfaill* editor Morgan Ellis. The Welsh author of the article raised the possibility of arson, but the American ministers downplayed conflict between either workers and the company and between the Welsh and the Irish that many Welsh blamed for starting the fire. Instead, the ministers emphasized the unity of the people of the Wyoming Valley, including the officers of the railroad company that owned the mine.

We must explain this split between Welsh-American ministers and seemingly all other Welsh people on both sides of the Atlantic. According to historians Bill Jones and Ronald Lewis, the Welsh-American elite, especially its ministers, seeking a privileged place for Welsh-speaking people in America, projected to the rest of America through its press, churches, and other institutions, a distinct Welsh identity. Welsh-Americans were to remain Welsh, but that Welshness was a middle-class identity defined in terms of supposed Welsh national traits of piety, chastity, respectability, and soberness, as well as musi-

cal and poetic. But it was also a Republican identity that had opposed slavery, loved a broad democracy, and expressed patriotism for both Wales and America. They explicitly contrasted their respectable Protestant Republicanism with their caricature of filthy, drunken, immoral Catholic and Democratic Irish.

Perhaps Welsh-American ministers responded to Avondale with such disinterest out of fear that working-class demands for mine safety laws and for the company to take responsibility would project an image, not of middle-class respectability, but of intemperate radicalism that might harm the privileged assimilation of the Welsh. The working class, however, had more pressing worries: basic survival in a dangerous industry.

The ministers' efforts failed. Welsh miners, who had been relatively conservative and accommodating in the past, became more organized and militant than ever. It was they, not the English and Irish miners, who drove the 1871 strike in the anthracite fields. But, nonetheless, they retained their privileged assimilation in America, never having faced the discrimination that Irish immigrants suffered.

The split in attitudes between the denominational press and the common Welsh people of the Wyoming Valley does not undermine the fact that the Avondale disaster was experienced as a tragedy for all Welsh people on both sides of the Atlantic. Regardless of class, denomination, language, politics, and region, the people of Wales expressed equal outrage at the deaths of their countrymen that were made inevitable by the incompetence, indifference, or greed of the DL&W. They spoke out in a common chorus with Welsh mineworkers and engineers of the Wyoming Valley, even if those workers' own clergymen remained mute.



Pennsylvania Labor History Society  
47th Annual Conference  
150th Anniversary Commemoration  
Avondale Mine Disaster



September 6 - 8, 2019

Thanks to these following sponsors for supporting the Avondale Commemoration:





## **Friday, September 6, 2019**

6:30 pm, Anthracite Heritage Museum, Scranton:

### ***Anthracite Coal Breakers of the Avondale Era: An Overview of the Early Stereographic Record***

Lecture by Richard Healey, Professor of Geography,  
University of Portsmouth, England

7:30 pm, Anthracite Heritage Museum, Scranton:

### ***Anthracite Coal Breakers of the Avondale Era: An Exhibition of Early Stereoviews, circa 1860-1885***

Opening for exhibit arranged by John Fielding, Curator  
and Richard Healey, Academic Coordinator

## **Saturday, September 7, 2019**

9:30 am, Anthracite Heritage Museum, Scranton:

### ***The Welsh of Scranton during the 1860s and 1870s***

Lecture by William Jones, Professor Emeritus of History  
and former Director of the Welsh-American Center,  
University of Cardiff, Wales

11:30 am, Washburn Street Cemetery, Scranton:

### ***Tribute to the Avondale Mine Disaster Victims***

Program hosted by Richard Sedlisky with description of the site;  
dedication of new marker listing the names of each of the 58  
victims buried here, all of Welsh heritage; memorial service;  
reading of the victims' names by Avondale descendants and local  
students; and Welsh music; Saul Schniderman will perform the  
*Avondale Ballad*. *If inclement weather, program will be  
at the Anthracite Heritage Museum.*

1:30 pm - 3:00 pm, Anthracite Heritage Museum, Scranton:

### ***The Avondale Disaster of September 6, 1869***

An overview and panel discussion moderated by Bode Morin,  
Administrator, Anthracite Heritage Museum with:

- *The Railroads*: Richard Healey,  
Professor of Geography, University of Portsmouth, England
- *The Causes and Consequences*: Robert Wolensky,  
Adjunct Professor of History, Kings College, Wilkes-Barre
- *The Cultural Context*: William Jones,  
Professor Emeritus, University of Cardiff, Wales

## **Saturday (cont.)**

3:15 pm - 4:45 pm, Anthracite Heritage Museum, Scranton:

### ***Remembering the Avondale Disaster***

Panel Discussion moderated by Mark Riccetti Jr., Director of Operations and Programs, Luzerne County Historical Society with:

- Steve Kondrad, Plymouth Historical Society
- Robert Hughes, EPCAMR
- Torry Watkins, Avondale Commemoration Committee
- Bill Best, Huber Breaker Preservation Society
- Fiona Powell, The Guild of Brythonic Tradition Bearers

6:00 pm, Anthracite Heritage Museum, Scranton:

### ***Pennsylvania Labor History Society (PLHS) Dinner***

Welcome by Bode Morin with musical entertainment by Jay Smar  
2019 PLHS Awards presented by Ken Wolensky, President, PLHS  
with citation from Eddie Day Pashinski, PA House of Representatives

- *William Sylvis Award:* **Walter Klepaski**,  
United Way Labor Liaison, Greater Wilkes-Barre Area Labor Council
- *John Brennan Award:* **Paul Tucker**,  
Author and Editor of The Union News
- *Mother Jones Award:* **Robert Wolensky**,  
Adjunct Professor, King's College

## **Sunday, September 8, 2019**

Presented by the Plymouth Historical Society (PHA)

10:00 am, First Welsh Baptist Church, Plymouth:

### ***Memorial Service***

Noon, Avondale Disaster Site, Plymouth Twp.:

### ***150th Anniversary of the Avondale Mine Disaster***

Memorial Program hosted by Steve Kondrad, President, PHA  
and a performance of *The Avondale Ballad* by Don Shappelle

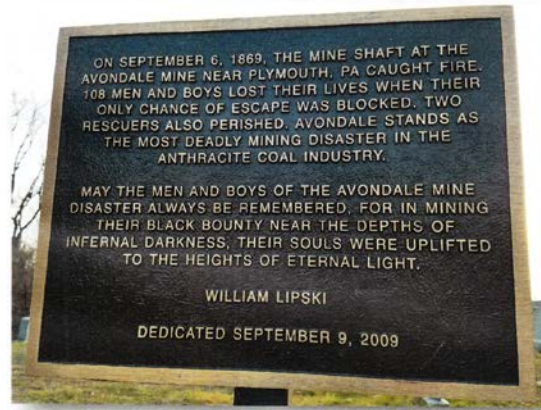
1:30 pm, Plymouth Historical Society headquarters, Plymouth:

### ***Refreshments and Fellowship***

Thanks to our Presenting Partners:

Lackawanna Historical Society, Anthracite Heritage Museum,  
Luzerne County Historical Society, Plymouth Historical Society,  
Pennsylvania Labor History Society

# 150th Anniversary Commemoration Avondale Mine Disaster



## Washburn Street Cemetery Memorial Program

September 7, 2019

### **Welcome and Introduction**

Richard Sedlisky

### **Opening Remarks**

Patrick O'Malley, Commissioner  
Lackawanna County

Dominic Graziano, Owner  
Washburn Street Cemetery  
Abington Hills Cemetery

### ***Avondale Ballad***

Saul Schniderman

### **Invocation**

Rev. Richard Baskwill  
Rehoboth Welsh Church, Delta, PA

### **Hymn #1**

*Calon Lan*  
John Decker  
Organist



# Reading of Names



Evan Bernardi

Owen Bernardi

Mary Beth Kondrad  
(descendant of John D. Evans)

Penny Harris Reynen  
(descendant of John Harris)

Fiona Siobhan Powell  
(James Powell, William Powell)

Linda Jones Lispi  
(descendant of David Rees, Sr.,  
William Rees, David Rees Jr.)

Jan Lohmann

**Memorial Tribute to Miners**

Rev. Richard Baskwill

**Hymn #2**

*Penpark*

John Decker

Organist

**Closing Remarks**

Robert Wolensky, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus of Sociology,  
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point  
Adjunct Professor of History,  
King's College, Wilkes Barre

**Benediction**

Rev. Richard Baskwill

Rehoboth Welsh Church

**Hymn #3**

*Cwm Rhondda*

John Decker

Organist

**Avondale Washburn Committee Members**

Steve Kondrad, Mary Beth Kondrad,  
Bill Landmesser, Bode Morin, Aimee Newell,  
Mary Ann Savakinas, Richard Sedlisky,  
Torry Watkins, Ken Wolensky, Robert Wolensky

**Avondale Presenting Partners**

Anthracyte Heritage Museum,  
Lackawanna Historical Society,  
Luzerne County Historical Society,  
Pennsylvania Labor History Society,  
Plymouth Historical Society

***A special thanks to Beverly Rugletic  
for her invaluable help with the program.***

--Presentation by Richard Healey (School of Environment, Geography and Geosciences, University of Portsmouth, UK): "Anthracite Coal Breakers of the Avondale Era: An Overview of the Early Stereographic Record" and the exhibit, "Anthracite Coal Breakers of the Avondale Era: An Exhibition of Early Stereoviews, circa 1860-1885": Both very interesting. Strong emphasis on the middle and southern coal fields.

- A stereoview by Beckwith of the re-built Avondale breaker is known to exist but has been missing for 40 years.
- Do any photos of the Diamond Breaker in Scranton exist?
- The primary anthracite stereo photographers: Thomas Johnson (300 Lackawanna Avenue, Scranton), Allen, Beckwith, Schurch, Kleckner, Hensel (Port Jervis, up to 1875-1878, Hawley after 1878)
- "The Land We Live In": a stereographic series by Hensel
- Photo in exhibit of Avondale breaker: Watson Bunnell
- Photo in exhibit of Kingston Coal Co. No. 2 Breaker: Hensel
- Photos in exhibit of Gypsy Grove breaker (c. 1870 to 1911, when it burned down) by Schurch, PCC breaker, Dunmore
- Two photos in exhibit of Racket Brook Breaker by Hensel

--Presentation by William D. Jones (Professor Emeritus, University of Cardiff, Wales): excellent presentation. His book, *Wales in America: Scranton and the Welsh 1860-1920*, is excellent. Many citations from his book in my 24-volume D&H series. WDJ: "Hyde Park was known as *The Athens of America* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sixty Welsh poets were here." SRP mentioned to Bill Jones that his father's maternal grandfather, James W. Reese, from Hyde Park, was the Welsh bard *Athenydd*. Bill Jones immediately replied: "From Aberdare?" SRP: "Yes, from Aberdare."

--Program in Washburn Street Cemetery, hosted by Richard Sedlisky: very nice memorial program. Several descendants of the men killed at Avondale were present, including people who came from Wales for the commemoration program.

--"Avondale Disaster, An Overview"--panel discussion:

- *The New York World*, *The New York Herald*, *The New York Times*, *The Scranton Republican*--but not the *Scranton Times*--all described the fire at Avondale as arson (the WBA was an Irish union; the 50 Irish miners/laborers who worked at Avondale did not go to work on September 6; the smell of kerosene was discovered in the tunnel following the fire; in deathbed confessions, two of the Irish miners/laborers who worked at Avondale said "We set the fire.")

--Program: "Remembering the Avondale Disaster": excellent panel discussion by local historical groups and individuals who are the primary promoters and guardians of the Avondale site. We are all indebted to them (see program for names) for their dedicated and fine work.



Torry Watkins' write-up of the Avondale Commemoration weekend, as published in *Ninnau*, November-December 2019, is given below. Regrettably, more than half of the article is about Torry Watkins and his family, and not about the Avondale Commemoration programs and events.

## Avondale At 150: The Event and the Symbol

By Torry Watkins

When it comes to commemorating the Avondale Disaster, I'm definitely the new kid at this table, and looking around the room, I'm not sure I have anything to say that most people haven't already heard, but it didn't take me long to realize that Avondale was not just a physical and historical event, but of equal importance, it was a powerful symbol of so many things: The economic and social significance of the Industrial Revolution; the struggles of our immigrant ancestors and how they compare, or not, with those of today's immigrants; the building of cohesive communities; the struggle for social justice and the rights of common people. They say the main thing that distinguishes homo sapiens from other species is our ability to manipulate symbols, so I'll invite everyone to freely indulge in their own symbolism around Avondale. Meanwhile, with your indulgence, I'd like to go off on a personal tangent for a bit, and try to show an aspect of Avondale's symbolism for me.

When I was growing up here in the Valley, Avondale wasn't exactly a household word, but there weren't many families, businesses or institutions that weren't somehow connected to anthracite. This was the 40s and early 50s; during the war years, anthracite had been given a new lease on life; the Sunday night breaker whistles up and down the Valley told you which collieries were going to work that

week; the steam railroads, all five of them, were depositing their soot on my mother's laundry line every Monday. From our house in West Scranton, the shortest walk to my high school was a straight line down across the DL&W tracks, over the culm banks at the ruins of the Diamond Colliery, and the ruins of the Mount Pleasant Breaker, across the O&W tracks, then across the D&H tracks.

When my path took me out of the Anthracite Region; the military; college; marriage and family, little did I realize that I would some day be pulled back in by something called the Avondale Disaster and the need to validate my anthracite (and Welsh) roots and maybe even get to play a bit part in the historical panorama. And although I left the Valley, as did so many young people those days, it became clear to me that the Valley never left me. I feel privileged to have grown up in the Anthracite Region. It was a place, a time, and a people unlike any other. One constant that remained with me all my life was my sense of coming from a family of Welsh miners who were singers, choral conductors, and organists, and even a few harpists. I eventually started doing what so many people are doing these days: researching my roots and making amazing discoveries.

Nearly everyone in my immediate and extended family were employed somewhere in the industry. My parents met while working in the D&H offices. My mother's father was a well-



Hymn singing to mark the 150th anniversary of the Avondale disaster

known driller and shaft-digger who worked both Anthracite and Bituminous. My last relative to have worked in the Anthracite industry was carried out of the Marvine Colliery workings on a stretcher around 1949. That was Uncle Jim the fire boss, who had a heart attack at the Marvine coal face. But it was my father's family who really established what I call my personal symbolic connection to Avondale. This connection, I'll admit, is more vicarious than real, but in my own mind the Avondale story is, or could be, my family story. I say this because my paternal family, at the time they immigrated, were the exact contemporaries of the

Avondale men and boys, and but for an accident of geography, the fact that they lived just a few miles away, and worked for the same company, but in a different colliery, it could have been part of my own family down there on that fateful day.

My paternal great-grandfather emigrated from South Wales around 1862 with two of his brothers, and they went to work at the DL&W Taylor shaft mine. Great-grandmother and five kids followed him over from Wales in 1870, and soon the family had 11 children, of whom my grandfather was the middle boy out of seven. All seven boys eventually followed their father into the Taylor

significance of the Washburn Cemetery in that history. Professor Bob Wolensky reviewed for the audience the entire sweep of the Avondale Disaster and its significance in the Industrial Revolution here in North America. Bob's seminar attracted an overcapacity audience of about 100, that crammed itself into a Hilton Convention Center meeting room. I'm glad the fire marshal didn't decide to make an appearance that day.

Following the seminar, we took a busload of people to the cemetery for another presentation by Rick Sedlisky and others, on the Avondale burials. These activities made a lasting

mine. My grandfather of course started as a breaker boy at age 7. One by one all seven boys worked their way out of the mines into other occupations and professions. Only their father—my great grandfather—stayed in the mine. He was killed in the Taylor Shaft in 1891 at age 56. His youngest son, age 15, saw it happen, and family members say he walked out and never went down the mine again.

To circle back to the present, the Avondale story was out of the public eye for a very long time, but it began to resurface in the mid-1990s and early 2000s in the Plymouth area and soon involved the Heritage Museum family and the Welsh Americans who were struggling to keep Washburn Street and its memories intact. The story received an important boost from restoration work at Washburn by the irreplaceable Bill Hastie and his son Trevor, and most importantly from the publication of Bob Wolensky's definitive book on the Tragedy. That was followed by Linda Scott's initiative in partnership with the Lackawanna Historical Society to raise funds by public subscription to complete Bill Hastie's repair work at Washburn. For their indispensable efforts, Bill and Linda were honored in 2009 by the Lackawanna St. David's Society.

With the reinvolvement of the Welsh-American community, an opportunity came along to take the Avondale story to new audiences, and that got underway in 2012 when the North American Festival of Wales chose Scranton for its annual event for the first time in over 80 years. The Festival was pleased to sponsor several seminars that introduced parts of the Avondale Story to an audience that was international in scope, yet included many whose ancestral families had become Americans right here in the Anthracite Region. Dr. Bill Jones presented findings from his history of the Welsh Community in the Anthracite Region, and he discussed the

impression on the attendees at the Welsh Festival, and really helped keep Avondale on the cultural map. Seven years later, I'm still approached by people who want to talk about it.

Building on the momentum from that event, our group has completed the next phase of the project that we hope will help keep the Avondale memories alive for generations to come. Apart from the mine tunnel itself whose preservation we're all happy to see coming along so nicely, and the various historical markers, the Washburn Street burial site is the single most iconic memorial we have for the men and boys who were lost that day. Only about 14 stones remain, and on those only a few names are legible. That has all now changed. Our brand new bronze marker clearly identifies by grave location the names of all 58 men and boys buried at or near the site. Thanks once again to the Lackawanna Historical Society for assistance in fund raising, and to the volunteers who worked so hard to accurately compile the names.

150 years: the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad only three months before Avondale, two world wars, economic growth and innumerable business cycles, social and technological change on a scale that our great grandparents could not possibly have imagined. The steady growth in rights for ordinary working men and women, and yes, the not-so-gradual erosion of many of those same rights in recent years. All this has happened in less than 3 generations from the day my direct ancestors got off the boat from Liverpool. But I think that they would be pleased that people like us still gather to remember what they were able to accomplish for themselves and for us. Today we commemorate and celebrate Avondale both as event and as symbol. I hope we can continue to look for ways to keep the celebration going.





## **150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Avondale Mine Disaster, September 6-7-8, 2019**

- The three-day event was a wonderful success for historical commemoration and preservation in America.
- The broad range of presenters and panelists and events during the three-day long commemorative program was extraordinary, and made it possible not only for all those who attended the commemorative programs but also for all the presenters and panelists and event coordinators who made the programs possible to gain a deeper understanding of a tragic event that took place 150 years ago.
- The Memorial Program in the Washburn Street Cemetery was an excellent vehicle for the local Welsh community to demonstrate, to Dominic Graziano and to Commissioner O'Malley (among others), that there is strong community support for restoration / preservation work in the Washburn Street Cemetery, an important landmark, in local, state, and national history.
- Given the broad range of presenters, panelists, and programs--and the enthusiastically positive response by all attendees to the commemorative programs and events--new and unexpected commemorative programs and events will surely take place in the coming months/years because of "seeds that were planted" at the Avondale 150<sup>th</sup>
- It wouldn't surprise me to learn that more than a few persons who attended the Avondale 150<sup>th</sup> had never before visited the Anthracite Museum/McDade Park or the Washburn Street Cemetery. These Avondale 150<sup>th</sup> programs and events, for those persons, were, therefore, 'a door opener.' Let's hope that those "new visitors" will come back, again and again.
- Lunch in the Washburn Street Cemetery: What a great idea. It was the equivalent of visit to a Welsh friend's house and having that friend say: "Dinner's in the oven. Stay for dinner."
- Sincere thanks to all event organizers and presenters for the hundreds of hours of work, over the past several years, that they devoted to this very important historical commemoration and preservation week-end in the anthracite fields of northeastern Pennsylvania.

S. Robert Powell  
Carbondale Historical Society